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ABSTRACT

Investigators agree that mothers employ a variety of request forms and that children seem to be able to respond to these forms with a remarkable degree of accuracy. It is suggested that the speech of mothers to their children is filled with requests which are really not requests at all. It is shown that many of what appear to be adult requests to children do not conform to the description of an adult speech act request. A speech act description of requests is given, and it is demonstrated that that description permits a more careful analysis of a mother's request to children than has been possible previously. The defective requests are categorized according to the different relationships of speaker, hearer, and action which existed when the utterances occurred. A functional explanation for specific defects which occur in mother's requests is proposed. (Author/NCR)

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A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF DEFECTIVE AND NON-DEFECTIVE REQUESTS IN THE SPEECH OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN

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> We are in the position of someone who has learned to play chess without ever having the rules formulated and who wants such a formulation. We learned [as a child] how to play the game of illocutionary acts but in general it was done without an explicit formulation of the rules.
> John R. Searle, Speech Acts, 1970

Much recent language acquisition research has focused on the comprehension and production of requests by children (Holzman, 1972; Shatz, 1974; Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Garvey, 1974). This research, particularly that conducted by Catherine Garvey, has been concerned generally with children's acquisition of communicative competence, and specifically with acquisition of the ability to comprehend other speakers' intentions which might be expressed in a variety of syntactic forms. Thus the speaker's intention that the hearer close the window might be expressed by "It's cold in here", "Could you close the window?" or other possible forms. The problem for the linguist is to describe the acquisition process through which the child learns to participate in speech exchanges involving such requests.

Working with a number of different methodological designs, investigators seem to agree that mothers employ a variety of request forms and, furthermore, that children seem to be able to respond to these forms with a remarkable degree of accuracy. Shatz, for instance, finds that 20 month old children respond to indirect requests at about the same rate as to imperatives (although she is uncertain of the explanation for this finding). Similarly, Holzman finds that children understand and use request forms in a variety of ways, while Ervin-Tripp asserts that "children in English readily interpret all of the forms which imbed imperatives, . . . and other forms one might think too complex syntactically". Finally, using a speech act approach, Garvey finds that children are able to achieve their intended effect by both direct and indirect requests to other children. I will suggest, however, that such studies may grant children more knowledge than the evidence justifies. Specifically, I will suggest

that the speech of mothers to their children is filled with "requests" which in fact are not requests at all. That is, given the generally accepted description of an adult speech act request (presented below), I will show that in an extensive corpus many of what appear to be adult requests to children do not conform to that description.

Speech Acts

A number of detailed descriptions of requests using a speech act approach have been attempted. Schnelle (1971) presents a general theory of language use and communication to children. Gordon and Lakoff (1970) and Labov (1970) describe conditions necessary for a request to occur. Labov's "pre-conditions", however, more aptly apply to commands only, specifically condition four, "speaker (S) has a right to tell the hearer (H) to do action (A)". Gordon and Lakoff's description of conditions for requests is useful, but their conditions are all incorporated in the more extensive description proposed by Searle (1970). Therefore Searle's description will be employed here.

First we must make clear what Searle's description is intended to accomplish. Searle is concerned with precisely describing the structure of illocutionary acts, i.e. questioning, commanding, promising, requesting, etc. That is, "what conditions are necessary and sufficient for the act [e.g. of requesting] to have been successfully and non-defectively performed in the utterance of a given sentence". Searle states these conditions as a set of propositions the conjunction of which defines a successful and non-defective speech act. A successful speech act is one in which the intention of the speaker has been fully understood by the hearer; and a non-defective speech act is one in which all conditions are satisfied. Thus theoretically certain acts may be defective yet successful if the speaker's intention is fully conveyed even though a non-essential condition is not met. In such cases one must describe why the act is successful.

For all speech acts, Searle lists four types of rules--propositional content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions--the specific natures of which vary for the different speech acts (e.g. warning, requesting, etc.). The conditions for a request to take place are the following:

Propositional content:	Future act A of H
Preparatory:	1. H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A. 2. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord.
Sincerity:	S wants H to do A (i.e. the utterance is not part of a joke, etc.)
Essential:	The utterance counts as an attempt to get H to do A.

We should note that this analysis easily provides for the related speech

acts order and command by the additional preparatory condition "S must be in a position of authority over H" and by revising the essential condition to read "The utterance counts as an attempt to get H to do A in virtue of the authority of S over H". These additional conditions will be useful in clarifying the precise nature of the mother/child exchanges, i.e. requests versus commands. I will consider both in the analysis.

Given these conditions which together constitute a definition of a request, we have a framework for precisely describing why specific utterances are or are not requests. For instance, we have ruled out such questions as "Who was the 8th President of the United States?" because the essential condition of this question is "Counts as an attempt to elicit information from H;" whereas we include questions like "Could you pass me the salt?" for which the essential condition "Counts as an attempt to get H to do A (i.e. pass the salt)" is satisfied. Similarly, we rule out "Don't fall!" which is a warning whose propositional content condition is a feared "Future event or state E" rather than a desired "Future Act A of H" (other conditions are also different here). Also, the interrogative form "Would you go jump in a lake?" is not a request in that both the first preparatory condition and the sincerity condition are not fulfilled. Finally, "Next add one teaspoon of salt" is not a request if the speaker utters the sentence while adding the salt himself, i.e. both the propositional content condition and the essential condition are not fulfilled. With this description of requests as a model and data from Bloom (1973), I will show that many adult "requests" to children violate these conditions.

Data

The data examined were collected by Lois Bloom with her daughter Allison. Four 40-minute video tapes of mother and child were made at ages 16 months, 3 weeks (stage I); 19 months, 2 weeks (II); 20 months, 3 weeks (III); and 22 months (IV). Transcriptions of the tapes include both linguistic and non-linguistic data, and are published in Bloom (1973).

Two judges not familiar with the above description of a request scanned the data looking for all of the mother's requests, commands, and orders. Whether the child responded in any way was not considered; rather the criterion for selection was whether an acceptable response to the mother's utterance would have been to carry out the action she appeared to request, command, or order. Thus the judges included a) utterances whose syntactic form was that of a command (e.g. "take off your coat"), and b) other utterances which would appear to an observer to be mother's request or command for action (e.g. "Can you put the doll in the trunk?").

Results

The judges agreed on a total of 113 requests and commands in the mother's speech in the four taping sessions. Each utterance was then examined carefully for conformity with Searle's description of requests and commands. A total of 44, or 39%, were judged to be non-defective according to Searle's conditions. The remainder, 69 utterances or 61%,

clearly violated at least one, and generally several, of the conditions.

Table I

Total Utterances	113
Non-defective requests . .	44 (39% of total)
Defective requests	69 (61% of total)

These figures are particularly surprising given the nature of the mother-child exchanges. The mother clearly does most of the talking and the initial impression of the transcripts is one of an active, attentive adult, "more investigator than mother", as Bloom states, who consistently appears to encourage the child to action. Yet in four 40-minute taping sessions seemingly filled with requests for action, there are only 44 non-defective commands and requests.

Types of Utterances

The ideal typology of request deviations would classify utterances according to which of the conditions is violated. However, most utterances violate more than one condition. Therefore I will provide a list of defective types classified according to a) timing of the utterance (e.g. the request might occur after the child has begun action A, therefore violating the propositional content condition "future act A of H"); b) the intended agent of action A (e.g. does S carry out A?); c) whether any action A is intended at all, apart from the question of who is to carry out A. First, however, let us look at a few non-defective requests.

As summarized in Table II, there does not appear to be a pattern in the frequency of non-defective requests through the four taping sessions, except that frequency is not related to age of the child.

Table II

Number of Requests by Allison's Age Level

	Age			
	I	II	III	IV
Category 1	3	1	0	6
Category 2	3	11	15	4
Category 3	8	8	3	2
Category 4	1	0	4	0
Non-defective requests	13	14	8	9
TOTALS	28	34	30	21

Thus at age I there were 13 such requests out of 28 total, (46%); age II, 14 out of 34 (41%); age III, 8 out of 30 (27%); age IV, 9 out of 21 (43%). Non-defective requests often were elaborated by S, with reasons given, yet with no response by the child. For example:

(A looks inside cup and spills juice)
Oh, you spilled it.
(A looking down at juice; looking up at M)
Uh, oh. I'll have to get a tissue.
Mommy will have to get another tissue.
Put this away, OK? Save this cup for later.
Mommy'll get a tissue.
(M leaves; A waits)

I, 29[1]

Other non-defective requests do elicit a response by the child.

Wiping baby chin? How bout wiping
your chin with your napkin?
(A takes napkin from M and wipes chin with napkin)

IV, 20

Also:

[M's utterances on the left, A's on the right]
Do you think she'd like to go for a ride in
the truck now that she's all clean? What do
you say? She'll go ride in the truck?
(A turns away from M towards chair)
Where's the truck?
(A turning back to M, pointing to truck) There!/
There.

(A stepping over toys)	up/step/step
(A walking to truck)	duck/
(A pulling duck out of truck)	truck/
(A bringing truck to M)	bop/bop/
	bop/bop/(whisper)

II, 91

More often, though, M must repeat the request or prod A to action. For example:

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[1]The numbering system corresponds to that of the transcript: the roman numeral indicates the taping session and age of the child, the number the "speech event" as determined by the transcribers. M=Mother, A=Allison.

Can you put the pig UNDER the chair? Can
you put the pig UNDER the chair?
(A holding pig walks to big chair)
(A putting pig on big chair) down/ə wídə̀/

I, 83

There is a total, from the four sessions, of 44 such non-defective requests by the mother.

Defective requests have been classified into groups according to the kind of defect which exists. A defect, again, is precisely defined: that is, a failure to fulfill one or more of the necessary conditions for a successful request to take place. Thus since there are theoretically five conditions, there are five potential individual defects, plus any combination of defects, possible in any utterance. In fact we find that most defective utterances fail to meet at least two conditions. For the purposes of this discussion, defective requests are divided into four groups: 1) action-initiated; 2) speaker as Actor; 3) exanimate; and 4) impossible action (see Table III below). Such a classification allows us to make more meaningful generalizations about the various defective utterances.

Table III

Number of Different Defective Requests

Category			
1	2	3	4
10	33	21	5
a-4		a-4	
b-4		b-9	
c-2			

Category 1: a) H has suggested A;
b) H is already doing a;
c) A is completed when request is made.

Category 2: S rather than H does A.

Category 3: S does not expect or want A.
a) warnings;
b) attention getters.

Category 4: H not able to do A.

Category 1: Action-initiated requests

An action-initiated request is one in which H has suggested A, or H is already doing A, or A is completed when request is made. These

requests fail to fulfill the propositional content condition "Future act A of H" and the second preparatory condition "It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord". Defective requests made when the child has suggested A total four and include:

What were we gonna do?
eat/cookies
Shall we eat cookies? (A looks up at M)[2]

IV, 5

There are also four requests made when the child has already begun A.

(A puts cover on jar)
Should we cover it up? OK. Let's cover it up and put it away.

I, 56

(A moves truck)
(A moving to sit on floor between M and truck, looking and then pulling at truck?) sit down right here
Sit down right there next truck. next truck/

IV, 65

Finally one finds two "requests" following completion of A, as

(A sitting down again) down/
Sit down.
there/
There.

II, 55

Category 2: Speaker as actor requests

Category 2 constitutes one of the most common types of defective requests. Unlike category 1, these requests are sequenced correctly, but are defective in that it is S rather than H, who does the action. Such utterances violate the sincerity condition and the essential condition. For example,

What's in the box?
Can you open it? Can you open it?
(A points to box, touching box) box/
Box. Well, Mommy's gonna see what's in it. (M opens box)

II, 6

[2]Note that in the transcripts A=Allison, while Searle labels A=Act. I believe that use of "A" is never ambiguous here.

Often we and let's are used in forms that function as descriptions of M's behavior where M does not seem to expect the child to do the action. Indeed, forms of we and let's appear in 26 of the 33 utterances of Type 2.

Up? Well, let's try again [i.e. arrange the cows]
Let's try again. Try it again.
(M arranges cows on floor)
(A stands up lamb)

II, 23

We'll have Baby [doll] sit in the truck.
(M puts doll in truck; doll slides down)

II, 38

OK. Let's splash. Can you splash? Can you splash?
(M bouncing doll in cup)
Splash, splash, splash, splash, splash.

II, 85

(A's cup tips, spills juice inadvertently)
. . . .
Yes. Let's wipe it up.
(A watching M wiping floor)

III, 47

Indeed, at age III (20 months, 3 weeks) there occurs a remarkable series of requests for action (specifically that the child remove her coat) where M attempts to carry out the action. These requests - in fact there are 19 separate sentences in which M asks, in various ways, that Allison remove her coat - are primarily of the form "Let's take your coat off" where M clearly does not expect the child to remove the coat.

(A goes to toy bag; reaching in) cookie/
OK., let's take your coat off first.
Let's take your coat off.
(A stand up with bag of cookies)
(M takes cookies from A, puts diaper in bag, tries to take A's coat off)

IIV, 25

You can do it all by yourself.
Can you pull the zipper down?
(M touches zipper)

III. 26

In fact the child recognized that M is the probable agent of the action, as Allison protects herself from M's advances.

[M has tied eating cookies to the requirement that Allison remove her coat]
(A holding zipper) zip/zip/
OK. Let's take the zipper down.
You take the coat off all by yourself.
(A holding zipper; holding her chin up) up/up/
Oh, I thought you wanted to have a snack.
(A walking to chair) No

III, 32

We don't have a snack with our coats on. No.
(A touching zipper) zip/zip
OK. We'll take the zipper off and you take your coat off ALL by yourself.
(A holding chin up, pointing to her neck) up/up/up
(A screams; holding zipper; pointing to neck; starting to cry) up/up neck/

III, 34

Eventually M makes it clear that action A must be completed before any cookies can be eaten. Thus the let's form eventually succeeds as Allison does the action.

Allison, let's take the coat off first.
That's the rule. That's the rule.
(M takes juice)
(A takes off coat; carrying coat to big chair)

III, 36

This final success does not imply that the previous requests are non-defective. Rather, Allison simply has determined that it is to her advantage to remove her coat; that is the only way to get some cookies. But throughout the preceding struggle whether or not Allison removed the coat was irrelevent. Indeed, M nearly forcibly removes the coat; her "requests" are merely attempts to convince Allison to permit M to remove the coat. Hence (1) the sincerity condition is not "S wants H to do A", but rather "S wants A"; and (2) the essential condition is not "counts as an attempt to get H to do A" but instead "counts as an attempt to accomplish A". The utterances, therefore, cannot be considered non-defective requests.

Category 3: Exanimate requests

Exanimate requests are those in which the speaker (in this case M) does not expect or want action A. Such utterances break both the sincerity condition and the essential condition. This category is distinguished

from 2 in that here no action takes place, while in 2 M does A. Category 3 includes four utterances which are warnings according to Searle's description, i.e. one of the preparatory conditions is that "S has reason to believe E will occur and is not in H's interest".

(M helps A step out of truck)
Wait, don't fall, please.
(A stepping out of truck) out/
Out. Very good.

II, 39

Soon after this utterance, M's warning to Allison is nearly a request and possibly should be so classified, i.e. "Remain in the truck", although it is doubtful that such utterances meet the propositional content condition for requests, "future act A of H".

(A takes duck out of truck; putting her
foot into truck) baby!/
(A throws duck on floor)
Careful, don't tumble. Whoa, I don't
think that's such a good idea.
(M helps A out of truck)

II, 45

The other major type of utterance in this category is attention getters. These utterances, of which there are nine in the corpus, break the propositional content condition, the sincerity condition, and the essential condition. Such utterances are in the imperative form, but cannot be considered commands since the conditions are not fulfilled.

(A trying to get off chair)
.....
Hey. Look what Mommy found.
Look what I have in the car (sic).
Look what else I have in the bag
. . ./car/. . .
Car.

I, 38

This category is the most striking example of the inadequacy of syntactic-based analyses of mother's speech. That is, there is no syntactic difference between the request/command "Put this away", the warning "Wait, don't fall, please", and the attention getter "Look what Mommy found". Yet the functions of these utterances in the speech exchange of S and H are fundamentally different. That is, the child's possible response to the utterances is different. To classify attention-getting utterances, which do not permit a response of action A, with the request/command form, fails to make a fundamental functional distinction.

Category 4: Impossible-action requests

This uncommon type of utterance breaks the first preparatory condition; that is, H is not able to do A. This category refers only to the inability to do A, not to an inability to comprehend the utterance. The only examples of this type of utterance are so ambiguous as to their intended hearer that I am tempted to eliminate the category, but I include it because the utterances reveal the degree to which M describes action for the child. The clearest example is the following:

(M and A return and sit down)
That's a girl. That's a girl. Here's some juice. Here's a cup for Allison, and a cup for Mommy. Let's bring the microphone over.

I, 13

The function of such utterances - in which not only is H not expected to perform A, but furthermore H is unable to do so - will become clear in the next section.

Functions of defective requests

The speech act description of requests presented here allows for a more informative analysis of mothers' requests to children. The problem remains, however, of how to account for the utterances which are defective. If such utterances are not requests, what is their function in the speech exchange? Here the example from category four is useful.

(M and A return and sit down)
That's a girl. That's a girl. Here's some juice. Here's a cup for Allison, and a cup for Mommy. Let's bring the microphone over.

I, 13

Certainly M does not expect Allison to bring over the microphone, yet why does she make the statement? I suggest that one of the most common functions of M's defective requests is to describe to the child the events around her. This purpose most clearly explains those defective requests in which M does A (cateogry 2); that is, M utters the request forms as description of behavior for the child (while an adult hearer would be expected to respond to the utterance, e.g. to assist in bringing over the microphone). By uttering such requests, therefore, M continuously presents situations for possible responses which, eventually, the older child will in fact perceive as requests. A clear example is the following:

(A's cup tips, spill juice inadvertently)
. . . .
Mess. Yes. Let's wipe it up.
(A watching M wiping floor)

III, 47

M does not expect Allison to wipe the floor; rather the function of the utterance "Let's wipe it up" can be paraphrased as "What I am now doing is called 'wiping it up' and this action would be an appropriate response to the utterance 'Let's wipe it up'." In a sense, therefore, M functions as both S and H. That is, she provides the verbal information which might reasonably accompany specific action, and also carries out that action. Thus the function of category 2 defective requests in the child's linguistic education is essentially different from the function of non-defective requests: non-defective requests function first as requests for action - that is there purpose; such defective requests, however, serve to assist the child to map the linguistic input onto adult's action and to clarify for the child the kinds of requests and responses possible in the adult world.

In addition to accounting for category 2 defective requests, this mapping explanation is equally applicable to category 1 defective requests. That is, in type 1 the mother's words serve to describe the child's suggestion or her completed action. For example:

(A sitting down again) down/
Sit down.

there/
There.

II, 55

(A holding zipper) zip/zip/
OK. Let's take the zipper down.

III, 32

In categories 3 and 4, on the other hand, there often is no explicit action by S or H, so the obvious mapping of language onto A is not present. In 3, first of all, attention getters and warnings are common. The "action" requested is an immediate one for attention getters; i.e. "look at me". Warnings, moreover, may not request any specific A. For example:

(M helps A out of truck)
Wait, don't fall, please.
(A stepping out of truck)

II, 39

In a sense, such a warning is an attempt to gain H's attention -- albeit with the purpose of avoiding a particular A. In any case, the immediate, often instantaneous need to attract or to warn the child appears to be the primary function of type 3 defective requests. These requests might "teach" something like rules for personal behavior, but their immediate safety-oriented goal in the S-H interaction appears to be their only functional explanation.

Category 4 requests are less clear. The function of the following passage seems simply the desire by M to avoid doing A herself.

(A squatting, looking at diaper) more/
We'll change it later.

III, 24

And the function of the following seems simply to build H's enthusiasm for A.

Shall we pack up and go home?

III, 84

Thus categories 3 and 4 do not match neatly with different functions, as do types 1 and 2. This may indicate that the system of categorization requires adjustment, or that defective requests are often too tied to the immediate communicative demands of S, or simply that functional generalizations may not be possible across the board. In any case, this question should be further explored, for if the fact of such a number of defective requests is striking, even more significant would be a detailed functional account for each type of defect.

Conclusion

I have presented a speech act description of requests and have demonstrated how that description permits a more careful analysis of a mother's requests to children than has been possible previously. I have categorized defective requests according to the different relationships of speaker, hearer, and action which existed when the utterances occurred. Finally, I have proposed a functional explanation for specific defects which occur in mothers' requests. Further explanation of the functions of defective requests would not only provide support for the adequacy of Searle's analysis, but also might explicate the role of subtle shifts in the speech act structure of mothers' input for child language acquisition.

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